



# Envision *Accessible* Manistee County!

**FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**October 2007**

**A product of the Easter Seals Rural Solutions  
Community Engagement and Accessibility Project**

**in collaboration with**

**Easter Seals Michigan  
and  
Manistee Alliance for Economic Success**

Funding provided by:





Main Street Arch Manistee, Michigan

## BACKGROUND

In January 2007, Easter Seals headquarters and Easter Seals Michigan staff selected Manistee, Michigan as the second site in the nation in which to pilot test and refine a model for a rural community engagement and accessibility project. This project was funded by a grant from the USDA Office of Rural Development. The project goal was to engage the community in developing an action plan for addressing the needs and inclusion of people with disabilities county-wide. Easter Seals selected Manistee County for a variety of reasons, including

- ◆ the modest population (Manistee city approx. 6700+; Manistee county approx. 25,000),
- ◆ 2006 completion of a 16-month visioning process called Envision Manistee County that involved over 700 people,
- ◆ leaders who are looking for ways to increase the community's economic base, including capitalizing on its unique location as a tourist destination,
- ◆ the community's efforts to begin making parts of the town and county physically accessible to people with limited mobility,
- ◆ the fine hospital and clinic system in place, and
- ◆ Easter Seals Michigan's desire to find a way to reach people in rural communities across the state that could benefit from its services.

## METHODOLOGY

The Easter Seals headquarters and Easter Seals Michigan staff collaborated with the newly re-engineered Alliance for Economic Success (AES) to facilitate the project. Community leaders and residents, including those with disabilities, were contacted by telephone and invited to an introductory meeting. The group was informed about the project and its goals and encouraged to participate. Over the course of the project, approximately 65 people were involved in some way. A core group of about 35 participated in a series of four meetings over a ten-month period between January and October 2007. An asset-based community development approach was used to frame the project activities. During that time they developed a plan for making the community a welcoming and accessible place for all people, including those with disabilities and chronic health conditions.

Similar to those used in the county-wide visioning effort, workgroups were formed in each of six areas of focus (i.e., education, employment, health, housing, recreation/social, and transportation) to:

- ◆ define barriers, issues, and needs related to universal access,
- ◆ establish priorities for initiating universal access based upon Envision Manistee County priorities and work group discussions, and
- ◆ develop recommendations and action plans for the County to respond to universal access needs

## **INDIVIDUAL & ORGANIZATIONAL PARTICIPATION**

Approximately 65 individuals participated in the process. The organizations represented by participants included:

Alliance for Economic Success (formerly  
Manistee Economic Development Office)  
City of Manistee  
Lake Michigan Broadcasting  
Manistee Area Chamber of Commerce  
Manistee-Benzie Community Mental Health  
Manistee County Community Foundation  
Manistee County Council on Aging  
Manistee County District Health Department  
#10  
Manistee County Transportation  
Manistee High School  
Manistee Intermediate School District  
Michigan Department of Human Services  
Michigan State University Extension  
Michigan Works!  
West Shore Medical Center



J. Cociolone, President & CEO Easter Seals Michigan, leads final phase one project discussion.

## **SPECIAL NEEDS AND ISSUES**

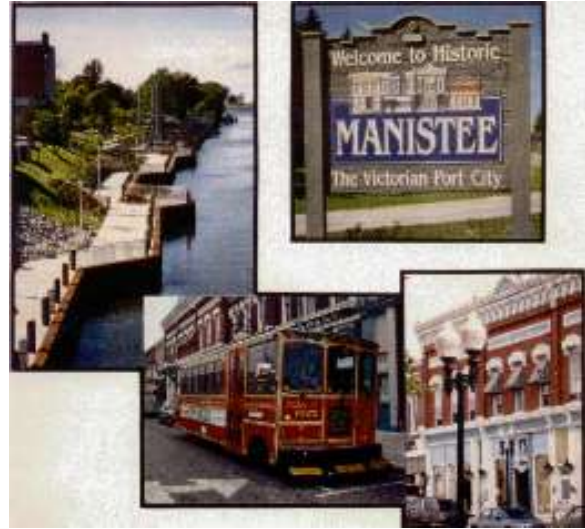
Rural, economically depressed areas, such as Manistee County, face challenges in the delivery of services for individuals who have disabilities, including:

- ◆ Programs and services are often not readily accessible or available.
- ◆ Private and public resources to provide the diversity of programs and services usually available in more urbanized and/or more affluent areas are absent.
- ◆ The number of older adults who have disabilities and chronic health conditions and require support services to maintain their independence is often well above the state urban norm. This is true of Manistee County.
- ◆ Programs for local residents affected by such issues as homelessness, substance abuse, and domestic violence often take priority over programs and services emphasizing universal access, education, and awareness aimed at helping local residents with disabilities.
- ◆ Health care costs that are often not fully reimbursed, which may be due in part to the large number of low-income residents' lack of health insurance, make expansion and delivery of health care services difficult for both the county and the individuals.
- ◆ Transportation options are often limited, distances to services long, and available vehicles are not accessible for someone using a wheelchair.

## OPPORTUNITIES

While economically depressed rural areas like Manistee County present challenges that are unique and different from more urban areas, they also present clear opportunities. Opportunities Manistee County holds include the following.

- ◆ The county's modest population (approx. 25,000), makes it easier to inform its residents about challenges and issues of concern to the community. And if the community becomes focused, mobilized, and engaged in formulating the solutions, significant progress can be made relatively quickly.
- ◆ The county's natural resources are remarkable assets and could be leveraged for economic development by establishing universally accessible recreation and tourism initiatives.
- ◆ The county's size also makes it possible through a variety of means, including local and state programs and volunteer efforts, to inventory and address significant barriers and issues people with disabilities face.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Four primary recommendations were defined as a result of the "Envision Accessible Manistee County!" initiative.

1. **INCREASE UNDERSTANDING.** *Increase community awareness of and education about disabilities and disability issues.*
2. **CREATE SOLUTIONS.** *Better identify education, employment, health, housing, recreation, and transportation needs of children and adults with disabilities and create solutions to meet them.*
3. **FORM PARTNERSHIPS.** *Work to establish community partnerships to support children and adults with disabilities.*
4. **PROMOTE A VISION.** *Become known as a destination accessible to everyone.*

## ACTION PLANS

**Recommendation 1:** *Increase community awareness of and education about disabilities and disability issues.*

## Workgroup Findings

### Education:

- ◆ A general lack of awareness about disabilities and disability issues exists among students and faculty throughout the school system.

### Employment:

- ◆ Employers are fearful about hiring someone with a disability due to potential liabilities and ADA requirements. The fear may be based on a lack of knowledge about the law.
- ◆ Access to work opportunities is sometimes hampered by lack of transportation and limited accommodations within the work environment.

### Health:

- ◆ In general, rural residents and health professionals in the area lack information concerning services available to individuals with disabilities, service and program eligibility among people who are underinsured, and programs currently available at various agencies.

### Housing:

- ◆ The community (including realtors, builders, contractors, developers, city planners, and the general public) needs to be educated on what constitutes an accessible home and the kinds of in-home accommodations and accessible features that are available to meet the needs of someone with disabilities and/or chronic health condition.
- ◆ Need for more accessible housing in general.
- ◆ Realtors need to know that there is a market for resale of accessible homes.
- ◆ People with disabilities need help identifying accessible living options.

### Recreation:

- ◆ The entire community's awareness needs to be raised around universal accessibility, particularly as the county moves forward with initiatives like the County-wide Recreation Plan.

### Transportation:

- ◆ Manistee County Transportation is an excellent resource but has very limited capabilities because of funding constraints. Additional services needed include: increased area of coverage, longer hours of daily service, and weekend operations.

## Workgroup Recommended Actions

- Implement the 2-1-1 system to provide a "911-like" system for people with disabilities to find and access programs and services that will meet their needs. *Progress to Date:* This program is now being developed through the United Way of Manistee County with grant support from the Manistee County Community Foundation.
- Construct a universally accessible model home in Manistee through *Habitat for Humanity* that can serve as a community prototype of housing that meets the needs of people with disabilities and chronic health conditions.
- Implement an anti-bullying initiative to increase awareness about disabilities and combat bullying directed at those with disabilities. *Progress to Date:* This program is now

underway in Manistee Area Public Schools, funded by the Manistee County Community Foundation.

- Utilize local media, such as the News Advocate, radio, and Channel 2, to increase communication and awareness surrounding the Envision *Accessible* Manistee County! initiative.

**Recommendation 2:** *Better identify education, employment, health, housing, recreation, and transportation needs of and solutions for children and adults with disabilities.*

## Workgroup Findings

### Education:

- ◆ School to work transitions need to be strengthened for children with disabilities; a specific avenue discussed was community involvement and partnerships with local businesses.

### Employment:

- ◆ People with disabilities need to learn about the Michigan Works! office and be encouraged to make use of opportunities available through it.
- ◆ Employers are fearful about hiring someone with a disability due to potential liabilities and ADA requirements. The fear may be based on a lack of knowledge about the law.
- ◆ Access to work opportunities is sometimes hampered by lack of transportation and limited accommodations within the work environment.
- ◆ Although most people could benefit from help in developing good interviewing skills, testing skills, and job search support, for people with disabilities such assistance is often critical to their success in finding and maintaining a job.

### Health:

- ◆ Many individuals with disabilities lack information on the services for which they are eligible. In addition, however, many agencies are unknowledgeable about the services their customers with disabilities really need and how best to provide the service or help the customers find them.

### Housing:

- ◆ While the workgroup suspects, based on the personal experience of some members, there is a serious need for accessible housing in the county, a formal survey needs to be conducted to identify the market and specific needs of that market so that ways to meet the needs can be identified and implemented.

### Recreation:

- ◆ Recreational needs of and opportunities for children and adults with disabilities must be identified and incorporated into the County-wide Recreation Plan.

## Workgroup Recommended Actions

- As part of its re-engineering, the Human Services Collaboration Body (HSCB) of Manistee County should establish a strategic plan among participating organizations for responding to unmet needs of county residents with disabilities. *Progress To Date:* The HSCB group currently has a strategic planning effort underway.



- The HSCB, through its partnership of organizations, should more specifically define what appears to be a high rate of autism in the county so that Easter Seals can determine whether, and in what capacity, placement of an autism specialist and/or some form of autism services is desired and feasible. *Progress To Date:* Easter Seals Michigan is currently conducting an inventory throughout counties in Michigan of needs related to children and adults who have autism spectrum disorders. Manistee county is part of that inventory and should a need be demonstrated here, funding for placement of programs will be further sought.
- As a part of the County-wide Recreation Plan, an inventory needs to be conducted of the current opportunities for accessible recreation and the viability of those opportunities. *Progress To Date:* Development of the County-wide Recreation Plan has recently started and will take place throughout Fall 2007 and early Winter 2008. The Easter Seals Access to Freshwater Grant has been awarded to the Manistee County Community Foundation as a continuation of the Envision *Accessible* Manistee County! Rural Solutions project. The funds will support a significant part of efforts to identify and seek opportunities to make Manistee a premiere destination for accessible recreation.
- Explore accessible housing options, including a definition of what a truly accessible housing option is and develop an inventory of accessible living options in Manistee County.
- Develop co-operative learning opportunities within Manistee County for students with disabilities. This is intended to build upon the program already in place by the Manistee Intermediate School District.

**Recommendation 3:** *Work to establish community partnerships to support children and adults with disabilities.*

## Workgroup Findings

### Education:

- ◆ Collaborative/Community based instruction, particularly for students with disabilities, would serve many purposes: ease the school to work transition for students, help students gain needed real-world experience, get the community involved with the schools, improve employer's understanding about disability issues (as mentioned in Employment subgroup).

### Employment:

- ◆ Although most people could benefit from help in developing good interviewing skills, testing skills, and job search support, for people with disabilities such assistance is often critical to their success in finding and maintaining a job. This fact provides a great opportunity to find an organization or individual that could partner with schools and disability service providers to provide such training.

### Health:

- ◆ There is a lack of funds for special needs and the process to get such funds can be demeaning and difficult. Discussions surrounded finding and making available local funds that are easier to access.

### Housing:

- ◆ Construction of a universally accessible model home in Manistee could be used to increase public awareness of the housing needs of people with disabilities and

chronic health conditions and serve as a community prototype for housing that meets those needs.

Recreation:

- ◆ Community awareness about the need for and benefits of universal accessibility, particularly as the county moves forward with its various initiatives, needs to be raised.

Transportation:

- ◆ Manistee County Transportation is an excellent resource but has very limited capabilities because of funding constraints. Additional desired services include: increased coverage, longer hours, and weekend operations.

### Workgroup Recommended Actions

- Assess, improve, and expand the current initiative administered by the Manistee Alliance for Economic Success in collaboration with Manistee-Benzie Community Mental Health to help people with mental health disabilities succeed in micro-businesses as entrepreneurs. This could be expanded to a program that includes support for people with ALL types of disabilities. *Progress to Date:* Easter Seals Michigan CEO proposed to the Chamber of Commerce leadership that if they would consider giving these new micro-business entrepreneurs a discounted Chamber membership fee of \$100.00 for one year, ES would be willing to pay that fee for up to ten people. Discussions will resume after a new director is put into place at the Chamber of Commerce. Funding is currently being sought to continue and expand programming for the micro-business initiative.
- Request the HSCB collaborate with Manistee County Transportation to assess how the County Dial-A-Ride service can be made more readily available and accessible to support the mobility of people with disabilities. *Progress to Date:* Another possible source of information and technical assistance is Easter Seals Project ACTION, Materials and contact information was shared with the workgroup and Easter Seals staff contacted the General Manager of the County Dial-a-Ride to provide additional details and encouragement for Manistee to apply for the opportunity to participate in the 2008 Mobility Planning Service Institute.

**Recommendation 4:** *Become known as an accessible destination.*

### Workgroup Findings

- ◆ All work groups concluded that development of a vision statement about making Manistee County a universally accessible location and a sought-after tourist destination was essential.

### Workgroup Recommended Actions

- **Adopt the following strategic vision statement: *To make Manistee County the premier destination in the world for those requiring universal access to recreation, with an emphasis upon access to the county's Lake Michigan shoreline and its miles of lakes, streams, rivers, and wetlands.*** *Progress to Date:* Michigan Easter Seals is pleased to announce a development grant of \$20,000 to the Alliance for Economic Success (AES). That grant will be used to develop the financial, technical, and human resources toward the strategic vision.



AES will use these grant funds to develop and/or match resources, such as those available from state and federal governments, the Great Lakes Fishery Trust, Access to Recreation, and other organizations, to develop and implement a strategy to achieve this vision in Manistee County. AES will also use these funds to work with other county agencies and organizations to seek resources to implement the strategy.

Short-term results this strategy is envisioned to yield include:

- ◆ Development of a county-wide recreation program that identifies current assets that serve people with disabilities and establishes a clear plan for developing programs and assets to achieve the vision.
- ◆ Access to Roger McCarville and his television show, *Disabilities Today*, as a way to market Manistee as a tourist destination.
- ◆ Development of new opportunities for people with disabilities to angle from the shore of Manistee Lake.
- ◆ Development of master plans and designs for universal access to the City of Manistee's First and Fifth Street Beaches.
- ◆ Funding to install a wheelchair lift to provide anyone who uses a wheelchair access to boats to enjoy and benefit from the renowned recreational fishery that exists along Manistee County's Lake Michigan shoreline.

## ASSESSMENT

Michigan Easter Seals will collaborate with the Alliance for Economic Success to assess progress toward the recommendations and vision included in this Final Report. In addition, Michigan Easter Seals will work with AES and the USDA's Rural Development Program to define, seek, and secure financial and technical assistance opportunities to implement these recommendations and assess plan results.



John Cocciolone, President & CEO Easter Seals Michigan (l.) and Carol Maus, Sr. Director Federal Projects Easter Seals, Inc. (r), receive certificates of appreciation from Renee Ihlenfeldt, Executive Director, Alliance for Economic Success, Manistee County at the close of the "Envision *Accessible* Manistee! Project."